



Translocal action research to *Stop the Sweeps*

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Abstract

This Update reports on ongoing action research spearheaded by the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP). WRAP is a coalition of homeless-led organizations based in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Rosa, Berkeley, and Oakland, California; Portland, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Austin, Texas; and New York, New York. Created in 2005, WRAP is leading a national campaign to Stop the Sweeps—evictions—of unhoused people. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are a driving force behind sweeps. As publicly funded zones authorized by city governments, BIDs facilitate extra fee assessments levied on property owners to fund services—especially policing and security services—above and beyond those already publicly provided in the zone. BIDs first emerged in the US in the 1980s, as a model intended for business owners to leverage public tax rolls for funding to control growing homeless populations in downtown commercial areas. Today, there are more than 1,200 BIDs in US cities, spanning a few to a few hundred blocks each. BIDs have steadily transferred control over massive amounts of public space to cities' largest property owners. WRAP and its core member groups are undertaking action research to understand the inner-workings of BIDs—in order to challenge their practices and, ultimately, abolish this model of publicly-funded privatized policing. Taking a “trans-local” approach, small researcher-organizer teams are working in several cities to investigate local BIDs and connect across jurisdictions. An understanding of BIDs across cities is informing WRAP’s multi-city House Keys Not Sweeps campaign.

Keywords

Homelessness, abolition, Business Improvement Districts, privatization, public space

Sweeps and their Impacts

Sweeps are a near-daily occurrence for many unhoused people living in public space in the US. Sweeps typically entail police, public works staff, or a city-contracted cleanup crew posting an eviction notice next to an encampment, often in response to complaints or 911 calls. Encampment residents are expected to then dismantle their shelters, pack their belongings, and “move along”. Cleanup crews confiscate anything left in the area. In most cities, crews are required to give a few hours to a few days of notice; often, loopholes allow sweeps to occur immediately, with no notice. Sweeps cause people to lose their survival gear and treasured mementos, identification and medicines. They generate citations and fines, causing additional barriers to accessing stable housing. Sweeps push people into highly toxic places and exacerbate health challenges. They are traumatizing, and they exacerbate other forms of violence that disproportionately impact homeless people along lines of race, gender, age, (dis)ability, and so on. In short, sweeps do nothing to address the root causes of homelessness, and instead further entrench racialized poverty (Beckett and Herbert, 2010; Dozier, 2019; Goodling, 2019; Herring, 2019; Herring et al., 2019).

Such sweeps practices, particularly the prevalence with which public agencies confiscate personal possessions including medicines and medical devices, have gained attention from Leilani Farha, former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and Human Rights. On a recent visit to San Francisco, California, Farha asserted that the level of criminalization of the poor in the US is *unprecedented* elsewhere in the world: “There’s a cruelty here that I don’t think I’ve seen,” she said (quoted in Gee, 2018).

Business Improvement Districts: Publicly Funding the Private Policing of Public Space

Over the years, WRAP’s core member groups have noticed that sweeps are especially violent in certain areas: Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).



Figure 1-3

Campaign Artwork
Source: WRAP Artwork website

Hundreds of North American cities employ a BID model to manage public space. BIDs are bounded areas of a few to several hundred blocks in which all property owners are required to pay a special tax (or fee), collected by the local government and dispersed to a private entity that manages the BID. A small percentage of funds are typically used to pay for additional services not already provided by the city: sidewalk accessories such as holiday lights and planters; branding and marketing materials, such as newsletters and light pole banners; and maintenance. The vast majority of BID revenue in the cities that WRAP has studied, however, is used for something much less benign: additional police patrols and private security, above and beyond what is normally provided by local police bureaus. In Portland, Oregon, for example, the downtown Clean & Safe BID finances four additional police officers, who coordinate directly with BID-funded private security firms—with no public oversight. To bolster such policing, BIDs also fund security camera and surveillance programs, as well as district attorneys and “community courts” that operate as revolving doors for unhoused and poor people committing so-called quality of life crimes (e.g., sleeping, standing still, sitting). These programs enable police and security guards to target poor and homeless people, working in tandem to push people out. In Sacramento, California, for instance, the Greater Broadway Partnership recently influenced the city attorney’s office to file a restraining order that would permanently ban seven homeless people from entering the Broadway business district.

A 2018 report from the UC Berkeley Policy Advocacy Clinic, developed in collaboration with WRAP, confirms that BIDs also spend a significant amount of property assessment revenue, including income from publicly owned properties, on anti-homeless policy advocacy more broadly. The report illuminates a strong correlation between the growth in the number of BIDs and a rise in laws targeting homeless people in California, even outside

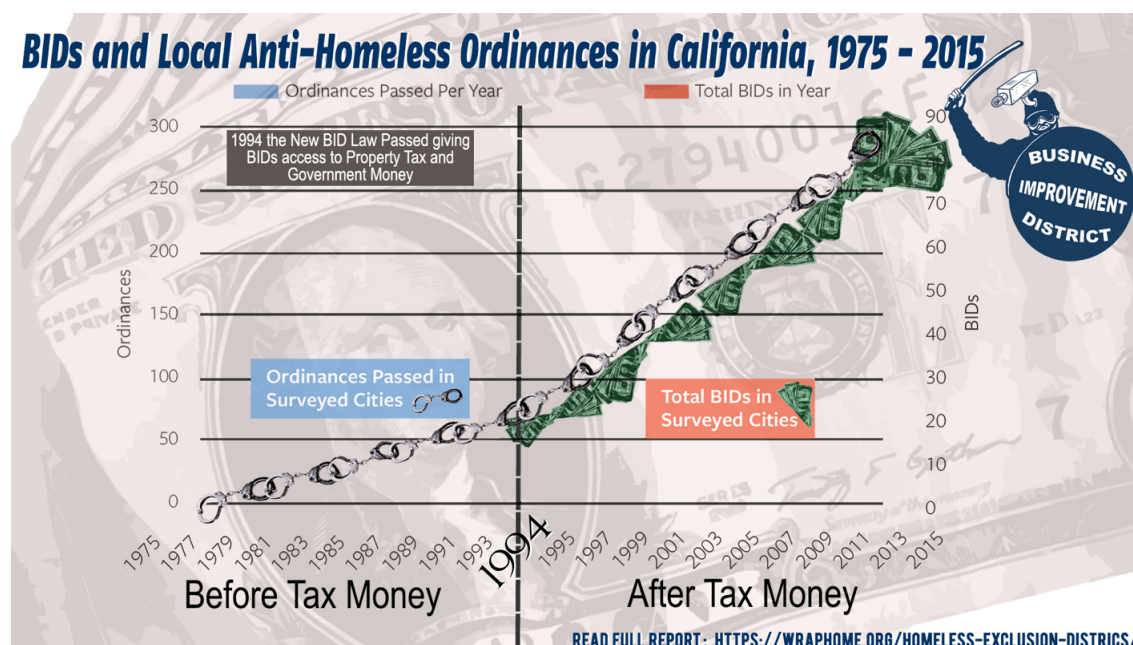


Figure 4

Campaign Artwork
 Source: WRAP Artwork website

of BIDs. It concludes that BIDs' policy advocacy efforts to promulgate cruel limitations on survival activities go hand-in-hand with the growing prevalence of anti-homeless laws. Such advocacy efforts are orchestrated by policy and government-relations specialists and registered lobbyists, whose salaries are paid by BIDs—and therefore with government-collected assessments.

BIDs orchestrate such spending on the systemic criminalization of poverty with little public accountability. A 2020 audit of BIDs in Portland found that despite approximately \$12 million (USD) annually funneled to local BIDs, the Revenue Division collects NO annual reports or budgets, and conducts NO annual public audits. The city, in short, does nothing to oversee the spending of public money on privately-controlled policing. Moreover, in many cities there is no accountability to anyone other than property owners. In Philadelphia, for instance, when property owners vote to establish or disestablish a BID, their votes are typically weighted by the size or assessed value of their property. The bigger and more valuable the property, the larger the say in whether a BID forms and how it ultimately functions.

In short, BIDs use *publicly* collected funds to *privately* police *public* space and those who inhabit it, with dire consequences for poor and unhoused people. Alarming, BIDs are on the move. Following homeless people pushed out of shopping districts, the model has recently begun to migrate from downtown commercial areas into residential and green spaces, such as in San Francisco's Potrero Hill Green Benefit District. While we do not yet have precise knowledge of how rapidly the model is expanding nationally, WRAP recognizes that moves to de-fund police departments may inadvertently exacerbate the spread of BIDs, and urges fellow abolitionists to be alert to this possibility in their analysis.

Action Research to Fight Anti-Homeless Laws

WRAP members have been alarmed about the role of BIDs in policing urban spaces for over 10 years. WRAP was founded in 2005 by local social justice organizations across the US West Coast to expose and eliminate the root causes of homelessness and poverty, empower communities to demand protection of civil and human rights, and advocate for restoring federal funding for affordable housing. Today, WRAP is comprised of homeless-led organizations in ten US cities, united in an effort to stop the sweeps of homeless and poor people. A new immediacy was brought to WRAP's concerns about the role of BIDs in sweeps with the publishing of the report mentioned above with the 2018 UC Berkeley Policy Advocacy Clinic, documenting BIDs' role in advocating for the enactment, preservation, and strengthening of local and state laws that criminalize life-sustaining activities, such as sitting, resting, sleeping, and food sharing (i.e., "anti-homeless laws").

Since 2018, WRAP has built on the Berkeley report and additional in-depth research in California to undertake comprehensive action research in more cities, to understand the inner workings of BIDs and their role in violating the rights of poor and unhoused people. To our knowledge, no communities have successfully challenged the BID model of policing in any overarching way. We therefore ask: *How do land use laws and governance of public space*

practices combine to disproportionately impact homeless people? What is the role of publicly funded privatized policing, via Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), in criminalizing homeless people? What are the bureaucratic and (extra-)legal mechanisms by which governments simultaneously bolster the power of property owners and intensify the precariousness of racialized poor people? Where might such systems be susceptible to challenges from below?

University and movement scholars have long contextualized BIDs and the protection of private property in larger processes of racial capitalism (e.g., Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2020). Yet, in order to successfully challenge BIDs and the city governments that enable their practices, it is necessary to understand much more about their nuanced inner-workings, including the legal and bureaucratic technicalities of their budgeting processes, oversight mechanisms, fee assessment formulas, police and private security firm contracts, and sweeps practices. In short, key details about how BIDs advance the goals of private property owners remain obscured—as do insights into how grassroots groups might challenge BIDs.

Over the past year, WRAP has therefore convened local teams of community and university researchers investigating BIDs in their own cities. To help local teams get started, we created a BID Research Toolkit, consisting of a Step-By-Step Guide to BID Research, an empirical question template, and a shared google folder system for uploading and organizing documents. Teams are currently obtaining, organizing, and analyzing public documents, with a focus on BID formation processes, funding mechanisms, oversight measures, and security/policing practices. Crucially, each team is closely connected to WRAP's local core member groups, ensuring accountability to local organizing and providing an opportunity for grassroots groups to be involved in—and act upon—the research. Thus far, we have completed investigations in San Francisco and have made substantial headway in other cities, including Portland, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and New York.

Connecting Scales: Trans-Local Approach to Research and Organizing

This research is not purely local, however. My own role as Research and Development Director at WRAP, in collaboration with WRAP's organizing staff, entails coordinating the local research teams, helping to ensure that local organizers and researchers in each city are up-to-date on what is happening in each other's cities, and coordinating synthesis of findings across cities. Once local research is complete, we will conduct comparative analysis of BIDs

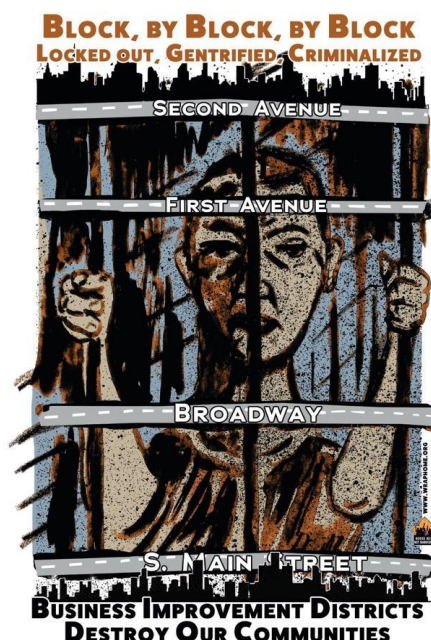


Figure 5

Campaign Artwork
Soucre: WRAP Artwork website

in different locales, looking for patterns, irregularities, and connections. Thanks to researchers such as Kevin Ward (2006, 2007) as well as our own analysis, we know that BID practices migrate from city to city, adapting to each place, even as the core emphasis on the *public funding of privatized policing of public space* remains consistent. We also know that umbrella entities such as the International Downtown Association (IDA) facilitate corporate connections from one city to the next in a quest to create “the shopping mall environment in urban corridors” (as the IDA website used to say); IDA’s recent BID-focused conference, for instance, featured booths hosted by billionaire multinational security and technology firms. It is crucial to link what is happening in different locales, and to connect local practices to larger flows of capital.

WRAP’s research model parallels the coalition’s organizing model, which stitches local organizing together across city and state lines into regional and national campaigns. For years, WRAP has organized bi-monthly member calls and an annual face-to-face meeting, ensuring that groups in different cities are connected, can share resources, strategize together, and encourage one another. At the direction of WRAP’s core member groups, WRAP staff supports this interconnected local organizing by doing research and developing fact sheets, creating artwork, facilitating legislative campaigns, tracking national news and trends, pursuing legal strategies, and more. BID research emerges out of and is beginning to inform WRAP’s growing House Keys Not Sweeps campaign, aimed at bringing an end to the criminalization of poor people.

In other words, WRAP’s organizing, and in turn this BID research, is *trans-local*. Lisa Fay, co-founder of Portland-based WRAP member group Right 2 Survive, explains, “My home is where my heart is, not bound to walls of brick and mortar.” Home, whether contained within a house or an apartment, a tent, a vehicle, or a doorway, is one of the most intimate spaces imaginable, and it is inherently place-based. Housing justice organizing is

Figure 6

Campaign Artwork
Source: WRAP
Artwork website



likewise highly localized. At the same time, the violent systems of oppression that housing justice groups are fighting against aspire to be ubiquitous, finding their way into nooks and crannies throughout the globe. BIDs are ever-evolving, as property owners seek new ways to surreptitiously police the poor. Undertaking trans-local organizing and research, generally, is an attempt to transcend this scalar mismatch. And unpacking BIDs, specifically, is one key piece to understanding and challenging, as Lynn Staeheli and Don Mitchell (2008:47) put it, “*how* particular private interests prevail in public space”—where houseless people so often make their homes.

Challenging the BID model is just one part of multi-scalar organizing in the fight for more just cities. Capitalists strive to produce “abstract space” (Lefebvre, 1991)—that is, space that is homogenous, functioning as a blank slate for capital accumulation. But there is ever-only a *tendency* toward homogeneity. Conceptualizing public space as decidedly *heterogeneous*—ever-evolving, context-dependent, and *contested*—remains an urgent task for organizers, researchers, and other change-agents, in order to understand how cities are produced, from above and below. Trans-local models of organizing and action research are likely to become ever more necessary in the years to come, and WRAP looks forward to strategizing with others in the fight.

Note on images

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